DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 445 422 EC 308 026

AUTHOR Smutny, Joan Franklin
TITLE Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom. ERIC Digest E595.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Reston, VA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-EC-00-4
PUB DATE 2000-05-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0026
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191-1589; Tel: 800-328-0272 (Toll Free); E-mail: ericec@cec.sped.org; Web site: http://www.ericec.org
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Identification; *Academically Gifted; Classroom Design; Curriculum Design; Educational Environment; *Inclusive Schools; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Portfolio Assessment; Preschool Education; Primary Education; *Talent Development; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest discusses strategies for recognizing and nurturing giftedness in young children in the regular classroom. It begins by describing giftedness and providing a list of characteristics common in gifted four-, five-, and six-year-olds. The use of portfolios for identifying giftedness is discussed, along with the benefits of consulting with parents. General principles of teaching young gifted children are then presented and include: (1) create a learning environment the invites inquiry, uses thematic instruction to connect content areas, makes a wide range of materials available, provides activity centers for self-initiated projects, has flexible seating arrangements, offers active, lesson-related activity options for students who finish work early, and provides opportunities for creative movement, mime, dance, and singing; (2) allow for flexible grouping; (3) provide variety; (4) offer choices to allow children to chose group mates and topics and assist in designing projects and their formats; (5) create ground rules; (6) evaluate students individually; (7) compact the curriculum; and (8) incorporate creative thinking. Teachers are urged to use tests, class assignments, observations, informal interviews, consultations with parents, and portfolios for ongoing assessment on how children are performing. (CR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 445 422

ERIC DIGEST

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON DISABILITIES AND GIFTED EDUCATION

MAY 2000

E595

EDO-EC-00-4

TEACHING YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN IN THE REGULAR CLASSROOM

By

JOAN FRANKLIN SMUTNY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EC 308026

ERIC DIGEST

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1589
1-800-328-0272; ericec@cec.sped.org; http://ericec.org

May 2000 E595 EDO-EC-00-4

TEACHING YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN IN THE REGULAR CLASSROOM

Joan Franklin Smutny

Recognizing and nurturing giftedness in young children presents an important challenge to educators. Schools need to respond to their educational needs before their abilities diminish or become less recognizable to those who can do something about them.

Giftedness in young children refers primarily to "precocity," a rapid rate of development in one or more realms. To some people, giftedness is purely academic and means, for example, that a child earns all A's on report cards. That child may be gifted, along with the children who, at age 3, can count to 100 or read a book, or pick out a tune on the piano.

But giftedness is more than developing skills faster or going through the developmental milestones earlier. Young gifted children are intensely curious, produce a constant stream of questions, learn quickly and remember easily, and think about the world differently than their age-mates. Their intense curiosity may get them into trouble, particularly when they try to figure out how something works. They may have a super-high energy level and yet be highly sensitive and perfectionistic. Young gifted children are at risk for boredom, frustration, and depression. Recognizing giftedness is important because to persist, giftedness needs nurturing.

Identifying Giftedness

Schools have often shied away from early intervention precisely because of the challenge of identification, and because initial assessments are often minimal estimations of a child's actual talent. The most effective way to recognize and identify giftedness is to use a variety of approaches over an extended period of time. Physical, social, and cognitive development is rapid and variable in young children. Cognitive and motor skills come suddenly: one moment the skill is not observable, then it suddenly appears. For this reason, testing may work at one time and not at another. A more complete picture of giftedness in young gifted children would involve observations of behavior and verbal ability in different classroom settings, anecdotal information from parents, and child products (art work, diagrams, inventions, lego buildings, stories—written or told).

Gifted behaviors. One way to begin finding gifted children is to focus on a range of behaviors that occur in the daily conversations, activities, and responses to learning opportunities in and around the classroom. Here is a list of characteristics common in gifted four-, five-, and six-year olds.

- express curiosity about many things
- ask thoughtful questions
- have extensive vocabularies and use complex sentence structure
- are able to express themselves well
- solve problems in unique ways
- have good memories
- exhibit unusual talent in art, music, or creative dramatics
- exhibit especially original imaginations
- use previously learned things in new contexts
- are unusually able to order things in logical sequence
- discuss and elaborate on ideas
- are fast learners
- desire to work independently and take initiative
- exhibit wit and humor
- have sustained attention spans and are willing to persist on challenging tasks
- are very observant
- show talent in making up stories and telling them
- are interested in reading.

Consulting with parents. Since about 80% of the parent population can identify their children's giftedness by ages four or five, a short cut to finding these students is to consult with parents. They have spent hours every day with their children over a consecutive number of years, observing them closely and interacting with them in a variety of contexts. In most cases, this makes them the most realistic predictors of their children's abilities and needs. Teachers can begin to tap this resource by composing a short letter at the beginning of the year introducing themselves, describing the goals for the year, and asking specific questions about the children's strengths, learning styles, and interests. Later, they can develop a system for sharing information and insights as the year progresses.

Portfolios. Portfolios present another option for a talent search in the classroom. A portfolio is a collection of products (e.g., assignments, paintings, drawings, stories, observations) from school, home, or a community center. It is a repository of what a child has done or *can* do. Categories of achievement and ability could include any of the following: use of language; level of questioning; problem-solving strategies; depth of information; breadth of information; creativity; focus on or absorption in a task; profound interest in existential and spiritual questions; self-evaluation; preference for complexity or novelty; ability to synthesize, interpret, and imagine. Portfolios provide authentic assessment. Conducted over an extended period of time, such evidence is valuable in determining instructional plans, especially for children in kindergarten to third grade. Both parents and teachers may use portfolios to identify talent and document its development ove time.

General Principles for Teaching Young Gifted Children

Many schools today have chosen to serve their gifted student population by enabling teachers to provide educational alternatives for them within the existing curriculum and in the regular classroom. There are a number of practical strategies teachers can employ to give young gifted students the challenge and stimulation they need without overburdening themselves with a great deal of extra work.

Create a learning environment. One of the first steps to consider when meeting the needs of young gifted students is the classroom environment. The classroom needs to be a place where all children can easily engage in activities and projects at their own level and pace. Here are some suggestions for designing a child-friendly classroom:

- create a room that invites inquiry (pictures, books, areas for music, art, and a variety of materials);
- use thematic instruction to connect content areas;

- make a wide range of materials available;
- arrange for activity centers for self-initiated projects;
- have flexible seating arrangements;
- offer attractive, lesson-related activity options for students who finish work early;
- vary the atmosphere of the room through music as well as opportunities for creative movement, mime, dance, singing.

Developing learning centers can support creative learning in the classroom environment. A linguistic center, for example, could have a variety of books, dictionaries, magazines, storybook character puppets, magnetic letters with boards, crossword puzzles, alphabet games, and computer software for word processing and story writing.

Allow for flexible grouping. Group work is common in preschool through the primary grades. For gifted students, cluster groups, where four or five gifted children work together, provide the most productive situation for learning. Grouping young children should always enhance the strengths students have, and the kinds of groups formed (structured, open, creative, divergent, content-based, etc.) should emerge from learning goals established for each classroom activity. Here are some guidelines for organizing small groups:

Provide variety. Offer opportunities for children to work with a variety of students grouped differently (interests, complexity level of assignments, motivation).

Offer choices. Whenever possible, allow children to choose group mates and topics and assist in designing projects and their format.

Create ground rules. Discuss ground rules with children. Rules for discussion may include: if you can't agree on what to do, try more than one idea; take turns sharing ideas; listen to others in your group; make your best effort; help each other; if you don't understand or agree, talk about it with your group; get the teacher's help if you need it.

Evaluate students individually. At the conclusion of group work, it is important to evaluate them individually. Evaluations (mastery tests, portfolios, checklists, oral responses, drawings, written compositions, etc.) should focus on individual learning rather than on how students contributed to the group.

Compact the curriculum. A proven strategy for serving young gifted children in the regular classroom is to *compact*--a process of compressing the essentials so that they can advance beyond the material they have already mastered. Most teachers create a system of testing and observation to determine the children's level of mastery. There are a couple of options for compacting. One is to allow gifted children to choose activities (unrelated to material covered in class) that particularly interest them. The other is to design an activity related to the current lesson that challenges their talents. In order for this practice to work in the long run, the teacher will need to design some kind of learning contract (signed by both the child and teacher) that stipulates the activities or projects chosen, the conditions for their completion, and the outcomes. The teacher can then help them locate resources both in learning centers and the library.

Incorporate creative thinking. Another way to serve young gifted children in the regular classroom is to incorporate creative thinking and activities into daily lessons--a strategy that benefits the other students as well. Young children particularly enjoy "what if" questions to stimulate new and alternative ways of exploring a subject or theme. A study of the rainforest, for example, might allow a child with an interest in lizards to become a lizard for a day. "What if you really were a chameleon living in the rainforest? What would you enjoy most about being one? Why?" Activities could include gathering new facts about that animal for the purpose of a mimed story, a self-portrait (which the child then explains afterwards), or written (or dictated) story. Teachers can support these activities by asking questions and suggesting different media and resources for their imaginative exploration.

Brainstorming with gifted children on what kinds of projects they could do may also generate ideas teachers may never have thought of on their own. The point of the brainstorming is to teach children at an early age to think of the different things they can do with the information they have learned. What would they like to do with it? What else could they find out? How would they like to express what they know? Activities could range (depending on the age and ability of the student) from map-making to naturalist studies of animal life, dramatic enactments, creative movement, art projects, and science experiments. This is where teachers' understanding of their students' unique strengths becomes vital in providing appropriate learning activities. A kindergarten class just beginning to explore numbers may be very dull to an artistically gifted child who already knows how to count to 50 and recognizes these numbers by sight. A teacher who understands the child's talent could offer encouragement to undertake an art project involving the theme of numbers (e.g., drawing objects or animals in multiples, then counting them, making designs out of numbers, exploring the relationships between numbers through art, etc.). This integration of subject areas also makes learning possible in multiple directions and allows young children to develop talents in different content areas.

Assessing and Documenting Development

Like identification, assessment should be ongoing. Teachers can use tests, class assignments, observations, informal interviews, consultations with parents, and portfolios to assess how the children are doing. However, they are only meaningful if conducted repeatedly over time and within a variety of classroom activities and projects. In this way, teachers gain a more comprehensive understanding of their students' talents and can create further learning opportunities for their development.

Conclusion

Early identification and intervention are essential for the growth and development of young gifted children. Equipped with practical teaching strategies and creative resources, classroom teachers are in a unique position to advance their talents in a stimulating environment of original thinking and discovery. A sensitivity to the special needs of young gifted children can make a significant difference to their future development and happiness.

Resources

Clark, B. (1992). *Growing Up Gifted: Developing the Potential of Children at Home and at School*, 4th ed. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International.

Kingore, B. (1993). *Portfolios: Enriching and Assessing All Students, Identifying the Gifted, Grades K-6*. DesMoines, IA: Leadership Publishers.

Smutny, J. F. (Ed.) (1998). *The Young Gifted Child: Potential and Promise, An Anthology*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Smutny, J. F., Walker, S. Y., and Meckstroth, E. A. (1997). *Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom: Identifying, Nurturing, and Challenging Ages 4-9*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Winebrenner, S. (1992). *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Joan Franklin Smutny is Director, The Center for Gifted, National-Louis University, Evanston IL , coauthor of *Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*, and editor of *The Young Gifted Child: Potential and Promise, An Anthology*.

ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated, but please acknowledge your source. This digest was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education (ED) under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0026. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OSEP or the Department of Education.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE